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ENG 4950-001: Literary History

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4950-1

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Literary History English 4950

This course is designed to be a reflective survey of major works of English literature for people at or near the end of their work as English majors. We will read widely and quickly through the various periods of literary history, with an aim to capture representative characteristics and qualities of both the periods and the works themselves. Much of what we'll consider, you will have read, but I expect you to reread; I also expect everyone to draw on their work in other courses to help us understand the larger issues and concerns that lie behind a given literary text. I will lecture from time to time, but I encourage everyone to remember and recognize that by this point in college, everyone in the class knows a great deal about literature, has read far more than they might imagine, and has a wealth of understandings at their disposal.

Requirements for the course are straightforward. I want each of you there regularly, with the reading completed, and I insist on active participation in class discussion; if you want an A, you must speak regularly in class throughout the semester. The major written work for the semester entails what I call the personal bibliography, which I'll present in detail in class as appropriate. This work will constitute 50% of your final grade.

Schedule I

8/26 opening, "The Ruin," "Diving into the Wreck"
8/28 discussion--"What is literature for?"

9/2 "The Wife's Lament" (handout) and Beowulf
9/4 discussion--"What is a classic and why should we read it?"; Beowulf

9/9 Gawain and the Green Knight
9/11 Gawain and the Green Knight

9/16 Chaucer, General Prologue to The Canterbury Tales
9/18 Chaucer, Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale; selections from Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe

9/23 Malory, from Morte Darthur; discussion--Arthurian tales
9/25 general discussion--medieval English literature

"The Ruin" from The Earliest English Poems, trans. Michael Alexander. Berkeley: U. of California Press, 1970

Well-wrought this wall: Wierds broke it.
The stronghold burst. . . .

Snapped rooftrees, towers fallen,
the work of the Giants, the stonesmiths,
mouldereth.
Rime scoureth gatetowers
rime on mortar.

Shatted the shower shields, roofs ruined,
age under-ate them.
And the wielders & wrights?
Earth-grip holds them--gone, long gone,
fast in gravegrasp while fifty fathers
and sons have passed.
Wall stood,
grey lichen, red stone, kings fell often,
stood under storms, high arch crashed--
stands yet the wallstone, hacked by weapons,
by files grim-ground . . .
. . . shone the old skilled work
. . . sank to loam-crust

Mood quickened mind, and a man of wit,
cunning in rings, bound bravely the wallbase
with iron, a wonder.

Bright were the buildings, halls where springs ran,
high, horngabled, much throng-noise;
these many meadhalls men filled
with loud cheerfulness: Wierd changed that.

Came days of pestilence, on all sides men fell dead,
death fetched off the flower of the people;
where they stood to fight, waste places
and on the acropolis, ruins.
Host who would build again
sharnk to the earth. Therefore are these courts dreary
and that red arch twisteth tiles,
wryeth from roof-ridge, reacheth groundwards. . . .
Broken blocks. . . .

There once many a man
mood-glad, goldbright, of gleams garnished,
flushed with wine-pride, flashing war gear,
gazed on wrought gemstones, on gold, on silver,
on wealth held and hoarded, on light-filled amber,
on this bright burg of broad dominion.

Stood stone houses; wide strams welled
hot from source, and a wall all caught
in its bright bosom, that the baths were
hot at hall's hearth; that was fitting
. . . . . .

Thence hot streams, loosed, ran over
hoar stone
unto the ring-tank. . . .
. . . It is a kingly thing
. . . city. . . .

"The Wife's Lament" from An Anthology of Old English Poetry: trans. Charles W. Kennedy. New York: Oxford University Press, 1960.

A song I sing of sorrow unceasing,
The tale of my trouble the weight of my woe,
Woe of the present, and woe of the past,
Woe never-ending of exile and grief,
But never since girlhood greater than now.
First, the pang when my lord departed,
Far from his people, beyond the sea;
Bitter the heartache at break of dawn,
The longing for rumor in what far land
So weary a time my loved one tarried.
Far I wandered then, friendless and homeless,
Seeking for help in my heavy need.
With secret plotting his kinsmen purposed
To wedge us apart, wide worlds between,
And bitter hate. I was sick at heart.
Harshly my lord bade me lodge here.
In all this land I had few to love me,
Few that were loyal, few that were friends.
Wherefore my spirit is heavy with sorrow
To learn my beloved, my dear man and mate
Bowed by ill-fortune and bitter in heart,
Is masking his purpose and planning a wrong.
With blithe hearts often of old we boasted
That nought should part us save death alone;
All that has failed and our former love
Is now as if it had never been!
Far or near where I fly follows
the hate of him who was once so dear.
In this forest-grove they have fixed my abode
Under an oak in a cavern of earth,
An old cave-dwelling of ancient days,
Where my heart is crushed by the weight of my woe.
Gloomy its depths and the cliffs that o'erhang it,
Grim are its confines with thorns overgrown--
A joyless dwelling where daily the longing
For an absent loved one brings anguish of heart.
Lovers there are who may live their love,
Joyously keeping the couch of bliss,
While I in my earth-cave under the oak
Pace to and Fro in the lonely dawn.
Here must I sit through the summer-long day,
Here must I weep in affliction and woe;
Yet never, indeed, shall my heart know rest
From all its anguis, and all its ache,
Wherewith life's burdens have brought me low.
Ever man's years are subject to sorrow,
His heart's thoughts bitter though his bearing be blithe;
Troubled his spirit, beset with distress--
Whether all wealth of the world be his lot,
Or hunted by Fate in a far country
My beloved is sitting soul-weary and sad,
Swept by the storm, and stiff with the frost,
In a wretched cell under rocky cli
By severing waters encircled about-
Sharpest of sorrows my lover must s
Remembering always a happier home.
Woeful his fate whose doom is to wa
With longing heart for an absent lo

Raymond Chandler, Raymond Carver, Willa Cather, Mark Twain, and Stephen King on writing

In her introduction to the first Omnibus of Crime, Dorothy Sayers wrote: "It [the detective story] does not, and by hypothesis never can, attain the loftiest level of literary achievement." And she suggested somewhere else that this is because it is a "literature of escape" and not a "literature of expression." . . .

But this is critics' jargon, a use of abstract words as if they had absolute meanings. . . . All men who read escape from something else into what lies behind the printed page; the quality of the dream may be argued, but its release has become a functional necessity. All men must escape at times from the deadly rhythm of their private thoughts. It is part of the process of life among thinking beings. . . . I hold no particular brief for the detective story as ideal escape. I merely say that *all* reading for pleasure is escape, whether it be Greek, mathematics, astronomy, Benedetto Croce, or The Diary of the Forgotten Man. To say otherwise is to be an intellectual snob, and a juvenile at the art of living.

Raymond Chandler in "The Simple Art of Murder" (1950)

Interviewer: How do you hope your stories will affect people? Do you think your writing will change anybody?

Carver: I really don't know. I doubt it. Not change in any profound sense. Maybe not change at all. After all, art is a form of entertainment, yes? For both the maker and the consumer. I mean in a way it's like shooting billiards, or playing cards, or bowling--it's just a different, and I would say higer, form of amusement. I'm not saying there isn't spiritual nourishment involved, too. There is, of course. Listening to a Beethoven concerto or spending time in front of a van Gogh painting or reading a poem by Blake can be a profound experience on a scale that playing bridge or bowling a 220 game can never be. Art is all things art is supposed to be. But art is also a superior amusement. Am I wrong in thinking this? . . . It doesn't *have* to do anything. It just has to be there for the fierce pleasure we take in doing it, and the different kind of pleasure that's taken in reading something that's durable and made to last, as well as beautiful in and of itself. Something that throws off these sparks--a persistent and steady glow, however dim.

You're asking me now to describe the sensation of the creative process, and I'm not sure I'm up to that. I can just tell you that it is an aesthetic and inttellectual and emotional feeling of fitness, of "everything is right here." I'm sure that musicians must feel this when they're writing music or maybe when they're performing. And certainly writers have to feel it, but not always. I wish it *were* there always, but it's there just enough that keeps us coming back.

A writer musn't lose sight of the story. I'm not interested in works that are all texture and no flesh and blood. I guess

I'm old-fashioned enough to feel that the reader must somehow be involved at the human level. And that there is still, or ought to be, a compact between writer and reader. Writing, or any form of artistic endeavor, is not just expression, it's communication. When a writer stops being truly interested in communicating something and is only aiming at expressing something, and that not very well--well, they can express themselves by going out to the streetcorner and hollering. A short story or a novel or a poem should deliver a certain number of emotional punches. You can judge that work by how strong these punches are and how many are thrown. If it's all just a bunch of head trips or games, I'm not interested. Work like that is just chaff; it'll blow away with the first good wind.

You write the best you can, and you take your chances.

Raymond Carver in
Conversations with Raymond Carver (1980s)

Writing ought either to be the manufacture of stories for which there is a market demand--a business as safe and commendable as making soap or breakfast foods--or it should be an art, which is always a search for something for which there is no market demand, something new or untried, where the values are intrinsic and have nothing to do with standardized values. The courage to go on without compromise does not come to a writer all at once--nor, for that matter, does the ability. Both are phases of natural development. In the beginning, the artist, like his public, is wedded to old forms, old ideals, and his vision is blurred by the memory of old delights he would like to recapture. (1920)

What has art ever been but escape? To be sure, this defintion is for the moment used in a derogatory sense, implying an evasion of duty, something like the behavior of a poltroon. When the world is in a bad way, we are told, it is the business of the composer and the poet to devote himself to propaganda and fan the flames of indignation.

But the world has a habit of being in a bad way from time to time, and art has never contributed anything to help matters--except escape. Hundreds of years ago, before European civilization had touched this continet, the Indian women in the old rock-perched pueblos of the Southwest were painting geometrical patterns on the jars in which they carried water up from the streams. Why did they take the trouble? These people lived under the perpetual threat of drought and famine; they often shaped their graceful cooking pots when they had nothing to cook in them. Anyone who looks over a collection of prehistoric Indian pottery dug up from old burial-mounds knows at once that the potters experimented with form and color to gratify something that had no concern with food and shelter. The major arts (poetry, painting, architecture, sculpture, music) have a pedigree all their own. They did not come into being as a means of increasing the game supply or promoting tribal secirity. They sprang from an unaccountable predilection of the one unaccountable thing in man. (1936)

In any discussion of the novel, one must make it clear whether one is talking about the novel as a form of amusement, or as a form of art; since they serve very different purposes and in very different ways. One does not wish the egg one eats for breakfast, or the morning paper, to be made of the stuff of immortality. The novel manufactured to entertain great multitudes of people must be considered exactly like a cheap soap or a cheap perfume, or cheap furniture. Fine quality is a distinct disadvantage in articles made for great numbers of people who do not want quality but quantity, who do not want a thing that "wears," but who want change,--a sucession of new things that are quickly threadbare and can be lightly thrown away. Does anyone pretend that if the Woolworth store windows were piled high with Tanagra figurines at ten cents, they could for a moment compete with Kewpie brides in the popular esteem? Amusement is one thing; enjoyment of art is another. (1922)

Whatever is felt upon the page without being specifically named there--that, one might say, is created. It is the inexplicable presence of the thing not named, of the overtone divined by the ear but not heard by it, the verbal mood, the emotional aura of the fact or the thing or the deed, that gives high quality to the novel or the drama, as well as to poetry itself. (1922)

If [the writer] achieves anything noble, anything enduring, it must be by giving himself absolutely to his material. And this gift of sympathy is his great gift; it is the fine thing in him that alone can make his work fine. He fades away into the land and people of his heart, he dies of love only to be born again. The artist spends a lifetime loving the things that haunt him, in having his mind "teased" by them, in trying to get these conceptions down on paper exactly as they are to him, and not in conventional poses supposed to reveal their character; trying this method and that, as a painter tries different lightings and different attitudes with his subject to catch the one that presents it more suggestively than any other. And at the end of a lifetime he emerges with much that is more or less happy experimenting, and comparatively little that is the very flower of himself and his genius. (1925)

Willa Cather from Willa Cather on Writing

I never had but two *powerful* ambitions in my life. One was to be a pilot, the other a preacher of the gospel. I accomplished the one and failed in the other• *because* I could not supply myself with the necessary stock in trade--*i.e.*, religion. I have given it up forever. . . . But I have had a 'call' to literature, of a low order--*i.e.*, humorous. It is nothing to be proud of, but it is my strongest suit, & if I were to listen to that maxim of stern duty which says that to do right you must multiply the one or the two or the three talents which the Almighty trusts to your keeping, I would long ago have ceased to meddle with the things for which I was by nature unfitted & turned my attention to seriously scribbling to excite the

laughter of God's creatures. Poor, pitiful business! Though the Almighty did his part by me--for the talent is a mighty engine when supplied with the steam of education--which I have not got, & so its pistons & cylinders & shafts move feebly & for a holiday show & are useless to any good purpose. (1865)

Indeed I have been misjudged from the very first. I have never tried in even one single little instance to help cultivate the cultivated classes. I was not equipped for it, either by native gifts or training. And I never had any ambition in that direction, but always hunted for bigger game--the masses. . . . Yes, you see I have always catered for the Belly and the Members but have been served like the others--criticized from the culture standard--to my sorrow and pain; because, honestly, I never cared what became of the cultured classes; they could go to the theatre and the opera, they had no use for me and the melodeon. (1890)

Mark Twain

But neither of these magazines [Atlantic Monthly and The New Yorker] have been receptive to my stuff, which is fairly plain, not very literary, and sometimes (although it hurts like hell to admit it) downright clumsy.

To some degree or other, I guess that those very qualities--unadmirable though they may be--have been responsible for the success of my novels. Most of them have been plain fiction for plain folks, the literry equivalent of a Big Mac and a large fries from McDonald's. I am able to recognize elegant prose and respond to it, but have found it difficult or impossible to write it myself (though most of my idols as a maturing writer were muscular novelists with prose styles which ranged from the horrible to the nonexistent: cats like Theodore Dreiser and Frank Norris). Subtract elegance from the novelist's craft and one finds himself left with only one strong leg to stand on, and that leg is good weight. As a result I've tried as hard as I can, always, to give good weight. Put another way, if you find out you can't run like a thorobred, you can still pull your brains (a voice rises from the balcony: "*What* brains, King?" Ha-ha, very funny fella, you can leave now).

But I've always been in love with each of these stories, too, and part of me always will be in love with them, I guess. I hope that you liked them, Reader; that they did for you what any good story should do--make you forget the real stuff weighing on your mind for a little while and take you away to a place you've never been. It's the most amiable sort of magic I know. (1982)

The fact is, almost all of the stuff I have written--and that includes a lot of the funny stuff--was written in a serious frame of mind. I can remember very few occasions when I sat at the typewriter laughing uncontrollably over some wild and crazy bit of fluff I had just finished churning out. I'm never going to Reynolds Price or Larry Woiwode--it isn't in me--but that doesn't mean I don't care as deeply about what I do. I have to do what I *can* do, however--as Nils Lofgren once put it, "I gotta be my dirty self . . . I won't play no jive."

If *real*--meaning !!SOMETHING THAT COULD ACTUALLY HAPPEN!!--is your definition of serious, you are in the wrong place and you

should by all means leave the building. But please remember as you go that I'm not the only one doing business at this particular site; Franz Kafka had an office here, and George Orwell, and Shirley Jackson, and Jorge Luis Borges, and Jonathan Swift, and Lewis Carroll. A glance at the directory in the lobby shows that the present tenants include Thomas Berger, Ray Bradbury, Jonathan Carroll, Thomas Pyncheon, Thomas Disch, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., Peter Straub, Joyce Carol Oates, Issac Bashevis Singer, Katherine Dunn, and Mark Halpern.

I am doing what I do for the most serious reasons: love, money, and obsession. The tale of the irrational is the sanest way I know of expressing the world in which I live. These tales have served me as instruments of both metaphor and morality; they continue to offer the best window I know on the question of how we perceive things and the corrolary question of how we do or do not behave on the basis of our perceptions. I have explored these questions as well as I can within the limits of my talent and intelligence. I am no one's National Book Award or Pulitzer Prize winner, but I'm serios, all right. If you do not believe anything else, believe this: when I take you by your hand and begin to talk my friend, I believe every word I say.

Because a great many readers seem curious about where stories come from, or wonder if they fit into a wider scheme the writer may be pursuing, I have prefaced each of these with a little note about how it came to be written. You may be amused by these notes, but you needn't read them if you don't want to; this is not a school assignment, thank God, and there will be no pop quiz later.

Let me close by saying how good it is to be here, alive and well and talking to you once more . . . and how good it is to know that *you* are still *there*, alive and well and waiting to go to some other place--a place where, perhaps, the walls have eyes and the trees have ears and something *really* unpleasant is trying to find its way out of the attic and downstairs, to where the people are. That still interests me . . . but I think these days that the people who may or may not be listening for it interest me more. (1990)

Stephen King, from various prefaces